
TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE....

A Column on Consumer Issues

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Consumer Protection and Antitrust Division

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RENTING A CAR

If you are jetting away on a vacation this year, a rental car may be part of your plans. Renting a car can be confusing and expensive if you don't understand the terms and how fees are calculated. If you have a poor driving record, renting a car may be next to impossible. Here are some points to consider and questions to ask when you reserve a rental car.

Call several car rental companies for price estimates or check rates through your travel agent. Ask about specials geared to the length of time you need the vehicle. Be sure to ask about restrictions on special offers, including blackout dates when an advertised price may not be available.

Some car rental agencies check driving records of potential customers. Even if you have a confirmed reservation, you may be disqualified from renting a car if you have had moving violations within the last few years; seat belt law violations; accidents, regardless of fault; or alcohol related convictions. Ask if the rental company will be checking your driving record.

Ask about charges before you sign the rental agreement. A Collision Damage Waiver is an optional charge. Rental car agents may urge you to buy this "extra coverage" option; however, you probably do not need it. Under North Dakota law, "non-commercial private passenger motor vehicle insurance" written in North Dakota contains property damage coverage for cars rented for fewer than 30 days, so you may not need to pay extra for the "collision damage waiver" option. In other words, you already would be covered under your personal insurance policy. However, if you do not purchase the "collision damage waiver" option, you may be liable for payment of the deductible portion of your personal insurance policy in the event of an accident or loss and a claim against your personal insurance.

A refundable charge may be required when you pick up your rental car. The charge varies, but may be hundreds of dollars. Most rental companies make the charge to your credit card but do not process the amount unless you do not return the car as specified in your rental contract. Until you return, however, your spending limit on your credit card may be reduced by the amount of the deposit. This may be important if you plan to charge other items to your credit card and are near your credit limit. If you do not have a major credit card or you do not want to charge the deposit, companies may ask for the deposit in cash.

Other expenses that may be incurred when renting a car are:

- ◆ Airport surcharges and drop-off fees can increase the base rental rate considerably. Such charges may be incurred if you drop the rental car off at a location other than your pick-up point.
- ◆ A fuel charge is an amount many rental car companies add to your bill for gasoline. Check to see what the actual difference in price would be if you were to return the rental car to the company with an empty tank versus a full tank of gas.
- ◆ Mileage fees usually are assessed on a cents-per-mile basis or as a flat fee when you exceed the allotted free mileage cap. Shop around to get the most favorable mileage terms.
- ◆ Additional-drivers fees and underage-driver fees are costs a company assesses when you share the driving with another person or when a driver is under a certain age.
- ◆ Out-of-state charges are assessed when you drive the car out of the state in which it was rented.
- ◆ Equipment rental fees are imposed when you order extras such as ski racks and car seats. If you are going to need to rent such items, be sure to reserve them in advance.

Before leaving the rental location, take a minute to walk around the vehicle, making note of any body damage. Report the damage to the rental clerk, requesting written notation be made of the damage before you leave the premises with the vehicle.

Most rental agencies have city and state maps available for vehicle renters. Ask for specific directions to your destination, including expressway entrances and exit numbers. Be sure to take the map.

Renting a car could be an unpleasant experience if you do not do your homework first. If you follow these tips on renting a car, you should be on the road to a great vacation.

The Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division investigates allegations of fraud in the marketplace. Investigators also mediate individual complaints against businesses. If you have a consumer problem or question, call the Consumer Protection Division at 328-3404, toll-free at 1-800-472-2600, or 1-800-366-6888 (w/TTY). This article and other consumer information is located on our website at www.ag.state.nd.us.

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